

AESTHETICS OF SOME KARNATAK MUSICAL FORMS

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We are concerned here with the high-art tradition of Southern India known as classical Karnatak music. Our study will be illustrative, not exhaustive, and shall consider three most important forms of Karnatak music, the *Tana-Varnam*, the *Kriti* and the *Pallavi*.

The essential basis of musical experience is joy. Artistic joy derives its birth and sustenance from *ananda* or Bliss, our innermost nature, and its external garb from the secondary aspects of art such as form, style, mannerism etc. He is an artist who has his being in the centre and mediates between the inner heaven and the outer earth.

In line with the Indian music tradition, organised melodic forms in Karnatak music are compounded of *raga*, *tala* and *pada*.

“*Gandharvam trividham vidyat swara tala padatmakam*” — Bharata. *Pada* here is used in its broader sense of syllabic structure, not necessarily having formal meaning.

The two most characteristic features of Karnatak music are

The *Kampita Gamaka*
Madhyamakala or *Tana* (medium tempo)

These, we may observe, belong to the higher degree of speed, the double, as compared with Hindustani music.

The aesthetic significance of the *Kampita gamaka* would seem to lie in a principle of reconciliation between the demands of scale position (a major

factor in the South Indian music consciousness) and of compelling artistic interval (*samvadi*, *anuvadi*, *vivadi*). *Kampita gamakam* is analogous to the ripple of water, and suggests *ardrata* or moisture of heart.

Tana Varnam is a composition both for practice and performance; both instructive and enjoyable. It enshrines a characteristic ethos of Karnatak music i.e. *Madhyama kaala*. Basically it seems to be an instrumental composition because the words have little or no significance. Purely musical, *raga*-melody progressing along even flow of rhythm (*sarvalaghu*), the text is there just by sufferance. There is much *karshana* or stretching of syllables, which is a necessary characteristic of the song.

“*Padam lakshana samyuktam yada varnoanukarshati
tada varnasya nishpattirjneye swarasamudbhava*”

—*Natyasastra*, 29 : 18 (Baroda)

Kriti

Till recently undifferentiated from the general compositional type known as *Kirtana* (praise, i.e. praise of the Lord, for that is almost always the theme of Indian song), the *Kriti* is distinguished by the dominance of *Dhatu* (melodic line) over *Matu* (text).

The three most outstanding composers of *Kriti* were Tyagaraja, Muttuswami Dikshitar and Syama Sastri (all of the 18th — 19th cent.) known as the Karnatak Musical Trinity. Their compositions are available to us in more or less authentic versions through *guru-sishya parampara*, and it is to these versions that we should refer.

Among these three composers, who in a large measure laid the infrastructure of the musical consciousness of Southern India, three distinguishing propensities could be discerned. Tyagaraja's compositions, a major portion of which are in *Adi tala* of 8 (4 + 2 + 2) *matra*-s, breathe the spirit of the *khyal* of Hindustani music. His typical compositions have a large degree of *Karshana*, i.e. fewer words stretched over longer phrases of music. His *Pancharatna Kriti*-s are an exception to this rule. For instance the *Kriti* of Tyagaraja in *Adi tala* (*Enduku Peddala: Sankarabharanam*).

Dikshitar's compositions remind us of the *Dhrupad*, and a large number of them are in *Rupaka tala* (Karnatak) of 6 (2 + 4) *matra*-s.

(‘Sri Subrahmanyaya’: Kambhoji)

Syama Sastri specialised in the *Tripura chapu tala* of 7 (3 + 4 or its obverse, 4 + 3) *matra*-s — a near relation, so to say, of the *Dhamar*.

1. *Janani ninuvina.* 2. *Ninnu vinaga mari: Purva Kalyani*

Rhythmic structure

Rhythm, as was seen earlier, becomes manifest by the principle of accent or beat. On-beat is called *sama*, and off-beat *vishama*. *Vishama* is again distinguishable as pre-beat and post-beat — *atita* and *anagata* according to current terminology in Karnatak music.

The on-beat and off-beat aesthetic principle operates not only in regard to the opening verbal accent of the section of the song but also in the internal arrangement.

- X Verbal accent
- || main *tala* beat or accent
- 1 secondary *tala* beat or accent

Opening line of *Kriti Enduku peddala*

									1				1			
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
									X	X						X

Let us compare this arrangement with that of a typical *Pallavi* which is an improvisational form with just one line of song.

Pallavi

									1				1			
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
									X				X			

(*Mandahasavadana* — *Hare Sri Krishna*)

The central beat of *tala*, called *arudi* in Karnatak music (psychologically, the *sama* of Hindustani music) is the main psychological resting point in the cyclic time-figure. In the typical *Kriti* of Tyagaraja quoted above the last syllable of the first part (*purvanga*) of song-line ends a little before the central beat, and the music passes over the beat in silence or cadence, to the second half (*uttaranga*). This gives a feeling of tranquil joy (*visranti*) for the intervening silence in peace; absence of conflict, even

of artistic conflict (of emotions) envisaged in the defractions of the one single *rasa* (*raso vai sah*) into 8 or more other *rasa*-s. Still, the "conflict", rooted though in *santi*, continues until the *Kriti* ends. The play of emotions implicit in the music is made explicit by the verbal correlate contained in the song.

On the other hand, in a typical *Pallavi*, the first part of the song-line ends on the *arudi* or *sama*, the resting point. The peace of the *sama* here is not passed over but arrived at; it is the goal. This psychological rhythmic centre is inviolable and has to be maintained along with even rhythmic flow, irrespective of whatever technical virtuosity is displayed. Or, at any rate, it was so till the early thirties of this century, when the whole orientation of classical music was towards peace, and music was meant to be soothing. The secondary and tertiary roles were played by the starting point (*graha*) of the first part (*purvanga*) and that of the second part (*uttaranga*) of the *Pallavi* line. Mere arithmetical approaches to the question of rhythmic improvisation display an woeful lack of touch with the aesthetic soul of traditional Karnatak music.

Before concluding, I should like to stress on the need to get to the core of things by scientific discipline — the 'science' not restricted to material sciences but comprehending the spiritual science of *yoga* — and to expand organically from the centre towards the periphery. "Seriousness" will then mean joy, for bliss is our inner nature. Many so-called complexities will then prove mere mental constructs, or rather obstructs, as in the case of *Sula tala* of Hindustani music, the equivalent of *Matya tala* of Karnatak music:

$$4 + 2 + 4$$

This is supposed to be a difficult and hence a rare *tala*. But the *tala* is not rare at all. It has been ringing throughout the land for some four centuries, since Tulasidasa's *Choupai* was taken up by the masses of the country.

In Karnatak music, too, the case is not different. The *Matya tala* is "rare" and "difficult". What generally passes off for *Jhampa* or *Khanda chapu* is but *Matya tala* in double speed, but even so it is found to be difficult. It is again a question of approach. The external approach is painful and perplexing. Like Tulasidasa, Purandaradasa (father of Karnatak music) sang in this "difficult" *tala* which comes naturally to a soul in beatitude, as in *Idu bhagya idu bhagya*.

The figure 4—2—4 is quite a parallel with H—O—H the composition of water, simple Aqua. It is very very difficult, indeed to combine hydrogen and oxygen in such a proportion and produce water. But, in nature, it is

the most basic thing, the very basis of life. So is the *ananda* within us the creator and sustainer of life. To the extent the artist and aesthete communicate with this substratum of our being, we communicate best with others.

In this short paper it has not been possible to go in greater detail into aesthetic analysis. But I believe I have given an indication of profitable line of inquiry which would help the practice of music. It is time that all those interested in the promotion of the understanding and appreciation of the art of music came together more and more on a common forum, as in this seminar. This way, we may hope to get an integrated vision of the integral experience that Art is.